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ABSTRACT

This report describes demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the children of immigrants, focusing on their economic status. Major findings include the following: (1) immigrant children are more likely to be poor than native-born children; (2) among children whose parents work full-time, immigrant children are at a greater risk of living in poverty than native-born children; (3) among children whose parents have more than a high school education, immigrant children are twice as likely as native-born children to be poor; (4) among children living in two-parent families, immigrant children are more likely to be poor than native-born children; (5) the race/immigration nexus is important to understanding child poverty; (6) recent reductions in child poverty and near poverty nationwide affected both immigrant and native-born children, but disparities between the groups persist; and (7) policies aimed at improving the economic security of children in the United States should pay special attention to the growing number and distinct characteristics of children of immigrants. (EV)

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Children of Immigrants
A Statistical Profile (September 2002)

Children of Immigrants in the United States are Growing in Number and Facing Substantial Economic Hardship

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Recent data from Census 2000 show that the foreign-born population in the United States has increased 57 percent since 1990 to a total of 31 million. In 2000, one out of every five children under the age of 18 in the United States was estimated to have at least one foreign-born parent, and one in four poor children had at least one foreign-born parent.* Empirical evidence on immigration and inequality suggests that many of the more recent immigrants will remain economically disadvantaged throughout their working lives, and this disadvantage may be partly transmitted to their children.

In order to develop strategies to address the economic hardship experienced by children of immigrants and their families, it is important to identify the particular demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of this population. As this report—which focuses on children in poverty—demonstrates, first- and second-generation immigrant children are distinct from third- or later-generation children across a range of characteristics, including parental employment and education, family structure, and race/ethnicity.

Most research on poverty among immigrants has focused on families or adults. This report examines the unique position of the children of immigrants in American society.**

* Based on 2001 March Current Population Survey. All succeeding numbers in this report are based on averaged data from the U.S. Census Bureau, March Current Population Surveys (CPS) for the years 1994–2001.

** Three distinct categories of immigrant status are used for this report: first-generation children (ages birth to 18), also referred to as immigrant children, are defined as those born in a foreign country; second-generation children refer to those born in the United States to at least one foreign-born parent; and third- or later-generation children are native-born with native-born parents. (Based on categories in Hernandez, D. J., ed. (1999). *Children of Immigrants: Health, Adjustment, and Public Assistance*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.) Most of the children of immigrants are U.S. citizens. (See Fix, M. E. & Passel, J. S. (2002). *Lessons of Welfare Reform for Immigrant Integration*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute <www.urban.org/urlprint.cfm?ID=7633>.

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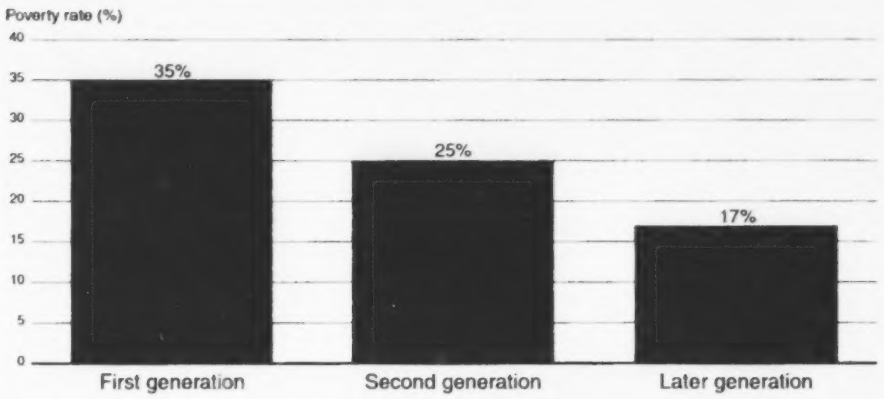
Immigrant children are more likely to be poor than native-born children.

- ***First-generation children are twice as likely to be poor as third- or later-generation children.*** Some 35 percent of first-generation children are poor, compared to only 17 percent of third- or later-generation children. The poverty rate for second-generation children is 25 percent.

Poverty rates of children by immigration status, 1993–2000

First-generation children are two times more likely to live in poverty than third- or later-generation children.

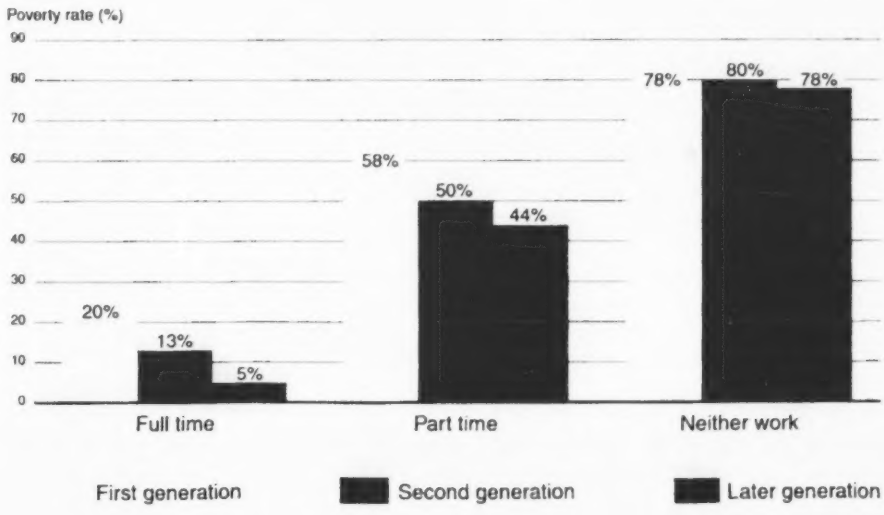


Among children whose parents work full-time, immigrant children are at a greater risk of living in poverty than native-born children.

- ***First-generation children whose parents work full-time are four times more likely to be poor than similar third- or later-generation children.*** While 20 percent of first-generation children with at least one parent who works full-time are poor, the comparable figures for second- and third- or later-generation children are 13 percent and 5 percent, respectively. Children of first and second generations whose parents work part-time are also more likely than similar third- or later-generation children to live in poverty.

Poverty rates of children in immigrant families by parents' employment status, 1993–2000

Despite their parents' full-time employment, one-fifth of first-generation children live in poor families.



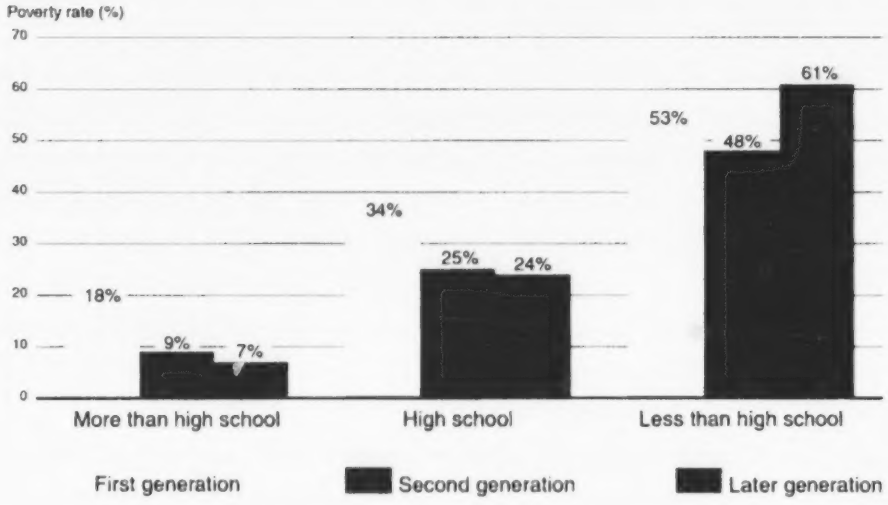
- ***More than one-third of poor first-generation children live with parents who work full-time.*** First- and second-generation children living in poverty are more likely to have parents who work full-time than are poor children of native-born parents. More than one-third of poor first-generation (38 percent) and second-generation (39 percent) children live with parents who work full-time. In comparison, less than a quarter of poor third- or later-generation children have parents who work full-time (23 percent).

Among children whose parents have more than a high school education, immigrant children are twice as likely to be poor as native-born children.

- ***Among children with at least one parent who has some education beyond high school, first-generation children are about twice as likely as second- and later-generation children to remain below the poverty line.*** About 18 percent of those first-generation children whose parents have more than a high school education are poor, as compared to 9 percent of second generation and 7 percent of third or later generations.

Poverty rates of children by parent education level and immigration status, 1993–2000

Among children with better educated parents, those in the first generation are more likely to live in poverty than those in the third or later generation.



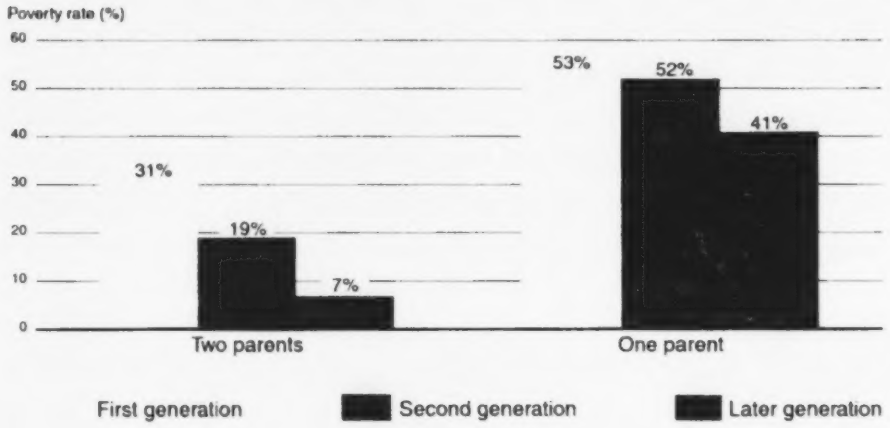
- ***Poor children of immigrants are more likely to have parents with low educational attainment.*** Almost two-thirds of the parents of first- and second-generation poor children (62 percent and 60 percent, respectively) have not completed high school. In comparison, about one-third (32 percent) of later-generation poor children have parents with less than a high school education.

Among children living in two-parent families, immigrant children are more likely to be poor than native-born children.

- ***First-generation children living with both parents are over four times more likely to be poor than comparable third- or later-generation children.*** About 31 percent of first-generation children living with two parents are poor, while the figure for native-born children is 7 percent. More than half of first- and second-generation children (53 and 52 percent, respectively) living with one parent are poor, compared to 41 percent of later-generation children.

Child poverty rates by family structure and immigration status, 1993–2000

First-generation children in two-parent families have more than four times the poverty rate as later-generation children.



- ***Poor children of immigrants are more likely to live in two-parent families than poor children of native-born parents.*** Over two-thirds (nearly 69 percent) of poor first-generation children and more than half (almost 61 percent) of poor second-generation children live in two-parent families. Only 27 percent of poor third- or later-generation children are living in two-parent families. The majority (almost 73 percent) live in single-parent families.

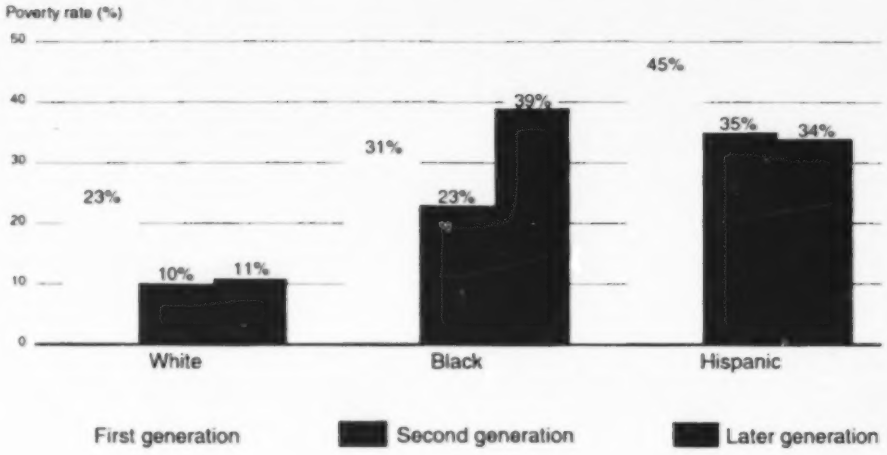
The race/immigration nexus is important to understanding child poverty.

- ***Regardless of their generation, white children are less likely to be poor than either Hispanic or black children.*** First-generation children of Hispanic origin are the most likely to live in poverty (nearly 45 percent). While white and Hispanic children who are foreign-born are more likely to be poor than white and Hispanic children of third or later generations, this pattern is reversed in the black population. First-generation black children are less likely to be poor (31 percent) than native-born black children (39 percent).

- ***The majority of first- and second-generation children in poverty are Hispanic.*** More than two-thirds (66 percent) of first-generation poor children are Hispanics, compared to only 14 percent of those of the third or later generations. In contrast, a larger number of third- or later generation children in poverty are whites and blacks (46 and 37 percent, respectively).

Race/ethnicity and poverty rates of children by immigration status, 1993–2000

First- and second-generation Hispanic children are more likely to be poor than similar white and black children.

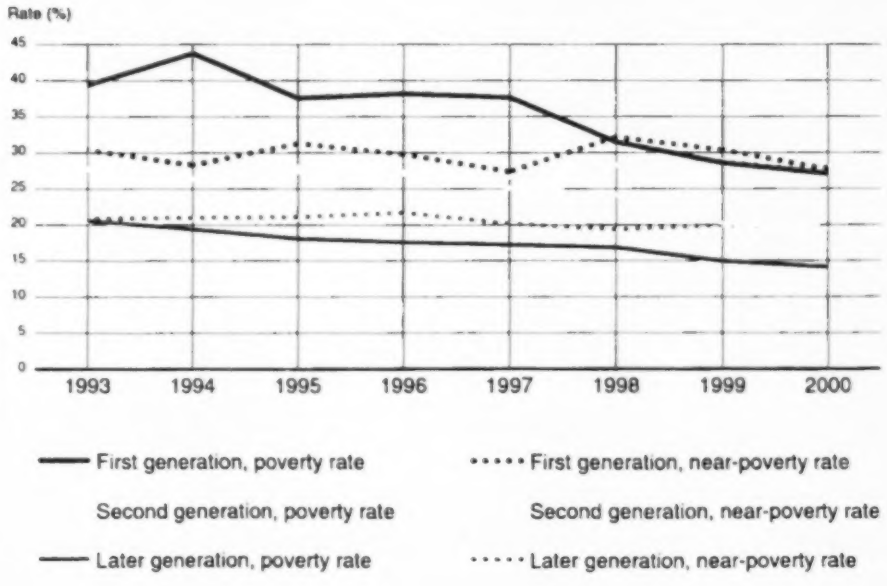


Recent reductions in child poverty and near poverty nationwide affected both immigrant and native-born children, but disparities between the groups persist.

- ***First-generation children were still twice as likely as third- or later-generation children to be poor in 2000, despite a national decline in the poverty rate since 1993.*** The poverty rates of first-, second-, and third- or later-generation children in 1993 were 39 percent, 28 percent, and 20 percent, respectively. By 2000, the poverty rate for all three categories had declined by 30 percent. Also, first- and second-generation children remained more likely than those of later generations to live in near poverty (between 100 and 200 percent of the poverty line)—28 percent and 19 percent, respectively.

Poverty and near poverty rates of children by immigration status, 1993–2000

First-generation children are more likely than later generations to live in poverty and near poverty.



Policies aimed at improving the economic security of children in the United States should pay special attention to the growing number and distinct characteristics of children of immigrants.

Policymakers need to consider why children of immigrants experience more economic hardship than other children. Policies and programs targeted at the poor need to take into account the social and demographic differences between immigrants and the native-born. Among families living in poverty, the parents of first- and second-generation children are more likely to be employed in full-time jobs and to be living with a spouse than are native-born parents. While, on average, foreign-born parents of poor children have lower levels of education, their rates of labor force participation exceed those of native-born parents.

The ongoing federal debate about restoring welfare benefits to legal immigrants has important implications for the economic well-being of children of immigrants. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) denied access to government programs for noncitizens who immigrated to the United States subsequent to PRWORA's enactment and limited eligibility for those arriving previously. Ongoing debate about this legislation needs to take into account the unique demographic and labor market characteristics of poor immigrant children and families, including limited English skills, high rates of labor force participation, low wages, and relatively stable families. The distinct experiences of different racial/ethnic groups that compose the immigrant Hispanic, black, Asian, and white populations also need to be studied. Researchers and policymakers should further investigate the common and particular social mechanisms that contribute to the impoverishment of first-, second-, and later-generation children across racial and ethnic groups.

National Center for Children in Poverty

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The National Center for Children in Poverty at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University works to identify and promote strategies that prevent child poverty in the United States and that improve the lives of low-income children and their families. NCCP was founded in 1989 at the initiative of the Ford Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York. For more information, visit NCCP on the Web at www.nccp.org.

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